

8.3, 8.4, 8.5

The Canterbury Tales, Chaucer, and the Middle Ages

Geoffrey Chaucer. 1343 – 1400. biography

- Poet, author, diplomat
- Son of London vintner (winemaker)
- Held civil service positions in government
- Well-travelled on diplomatic missions for the king
- Read English, Latin, Italian, and French

The Three Estates. explanation

- The Canterbury Tales depicts the three major social classes of his age:
- Those Who Work (Peasants & Middle Class)
 - Merchants, Laborers, Farmers, Government officials, etc.
- Those Who Pray (Clergy)
 - Priests, Monks, Abbots, Friars, Pardoners
- Those Who Fight (Nobility)
 - Knights, Squires, Mercenaries, Princes, Dukes, etc.

Pilgrimages.history

- Pilgrimages began as exercises in penance (attempts to earn forgiveness)
- Roads were poorly maintained. Thieves hid in wait for lone travelers, so most people traveled as “pilgrims” in a large group.
- “Professional” pilgrims visited many sites & returned with relics, badges, pilgrim symbols, tall tales (some of these were falsified).
- The pilgrimage to Canterbury began as a tribute to Thomas Beckett, who had been murdered in the 12th century

Canterbury Tales.background

- Begun: 1386
- Planned: 120 tales
- Completed: 22 tales and 2 fragments
- Pilgrimage was a “framing device” for tales; tales also have “thematic unity”.
- The pilgrims share stories to pass the time; these stories described the very different points-of-view and beliefs and practices of the people of Chaucer’s age.

Content Knowledge.frame story

- a story that holds together (or frames) several other stories; often, characters in the frame story tell unique stories of their own.
 - e.g. each of the characters in The Canterbury Tales tells their own story, which has a new, separate setting, theme, cast of characters, etc.
- The Canterbury Tales is the story of a group of pilgrims who tell stories as they travel to Canterbury
 - each pilgrim’s story stands alone as its own story, but fits within the overall story of the journey.

Content Knowledge.iambic pentameter

- Iambic Pentameter: a line of poetry that contains five ("penta" means "five") "iambs" (metrical feet).
- Iamb: a metrical foot that contains one unstressed and one stressed syllable.
- Example:
 - Of *the* deep *rivers*, *and* the *lonely streams*.
 - From *this* green *earth*; of *all* the *mighty world*.
- Assignment: Find an example from *The Prologue*.

Content Knowledge.couplets

- Couplets are pairs of lines that rhyme.
 - e.g. "I cannot go to school today."
Said little Peggy Ann McKay.
I have the measles and the mumps,
a gash, a rash and purple bumps."
- Couplets are among the simplest rhyme schemes.
- This was the age before *prose fiction*- fictional stories were told through poetry, and poetry had to rhyme.

Content Knowledge.characterization

- Characterization is the manner in which an author describes a character to the reader. Characterization *tells us something about the character*.
 - e.g. The Pardoner is characterized by his immorality and his hypocrisy
- Find an example of characterization in *The Prologue*.
- There are two types of characterization: direct and indirect.

Content Knowledge.indirect-characterization.definition

- Indirect Characterization occurs when an author tells what a character does, says, or looks like, or describes how other characters react to him or her.
- The reader must use their judgment to decide what the character is like.
- What can you infer about this character:
 - Bill straightened his starched suit and slicked back his hair; he looked at himself in the mirror, then smiled with satisfaction.

Indirect Characterization.examples

- Chaucer uses these types of indirect characterization (and others):
 - “This yeoman wore a coat and hood of green, And peacock-feathered arrows, bright and keen” (Appearance)
 - Her greatest oath was only “By St. Loy!” (Speech)
 - “And gladly would he learn, and gladly teach.” (Attitude/Behavior/Feelings)

Content Knowledge.direct-characterization.definition/examples

- Direct characterization occurs when the author states a character’s traits—virtuous, vain, clever, etc.
 - e.g. Bill was vain and self-centered.
- Chaucer also uses direct characterization, especially on his minor characters:
 - There was a Friar, a wanton one and merry,
A Limiter, a very festive fellow.

Content Knowledge.irony

- irony: incongruity between what might be expected and what actually occurs.
 - coincidence is not irony, though the two are similar.
- verbal irony: The contrast between what is said and what is actually meant.
 - the surface meaning and the underlying meaning of what is said is not the same.

Content Knowledge.satire

- Chaucer provides some details that contradict what the characters think of themselves. This is a form of satire:
 - witty language convey insult/scorn
 - ridicules its subject (for example, individuals, organizations, or states) often as an intended means of provoking or preventing change

The Canterbury Tales.significance

Why are these poems important?

1. Accurate depiction of life in the middle ages (class levels, interactions between the classes)
2. First story about lower classes
3. Satire & humor for social / political / religious commentary.
4. "The Canterbury Tales" point out problems within society.

The Canterbury Tales.method

- Chaucer tells us a lot about the pilgrims:
- social rank, moral & spiritual condition
- Include many of the following
 - Physiognomy
 - Clothes
 - Job
 - Hobbies
 - Food Choice
 - Humour
 - Their Words

Canterbury Tales.overview

- Some tales are saddening, others are comical.
- Each pilgrim is made up of a set of traits, beliefs, and faults.
- Chaucer criticized characters from each class, but he was especially critical of the clergy (for their hypocrisy)
- Many of the tales shared similar themes; some tales are told in response to a previous tale (e.g. a story about the joy of immorality is followed by a story about the punishment for sinners)

The Canterbury Tales.characterization.application

- As you read the Prologue, pay close attention to any details that help give you an immediate impression of a character.

Assignment:

- Write down one direct and one indirect characterization for five of the characters.

Characters.narrator

- The **Narrator** is Chaucer, but don't confuse "pilgrim Chaucer" with "author Chaucer"
- Narrator is acting as a reporter of what others say, not adding/removing.
- Pretends to be unaware of irony or satire.

Characters.wife of bath

- The **Wife of Bath** is one of three women on the trip.
- The narrator says, "She was a worthy woman all her life", then mentions her 5 husbands. This is an example of _____.
- She is a business woman of strong self-importance.
- Her elaborate dress is a sign of her character as well as her wealth.

Characters.summoner-and-pardoner

- The **Summoner** and the **Pardoner** are two unlikeable figures; one administers the church courts, the other sells pardons (indulgences).
- The Summoner is suffering from some kind of skin disease. What might this tell us about him?
- How does the Pardoner's description compare with other pilgrims? More or less negative?

Other Characters.application

- The Knight & the Squire
 - how does their dress & way of carrying themselves differ from the others and from each other?
- The Guildsmen
 - what does their wives' attitude say about the changing times of the age?
- The Prioress
 - what is odd about her description?
- The Parson
 - how is he different from the other clergy
